

Progressive Writing Instruction: Empowering School Leaders and Teachers

If your children are attending college, the chances are that when they graduate they will be unable to write ordinary, expository English with any real degree of structure and lucidity. If they are in high school and planning to attend college, the chances are less than even that they will be able to write English at the minimal college level when they get there. If they are not planning to attend college, their skills in writing English may not even qualify them for secretarial or clerical work. (Sheils, 1975, p. 58)

The quote above illustrates the alarming message that our educational system is failing youth. *Why Johnny Can't Write* headlined *Newsweek* 36 years ago. More recently, the National Commission on Writing (2005) brought the writing crisis to the national educational forefront. Many recent publications have described writing as the neglected "r" (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007; Biancarosa & Snow, 2004; Gilbert & Graham, 2010; National Writing Project & Nagin, 2003). There is very little data on what writing instruction looks like in schools, especially in grades 4–6 (Gilbert & Graham, 2010). Most studies of the past examine teachers who teach writing in an exceptional way (Pressley, Gaskins, Solic, & Collins, 2006; Rankin-Erickson & Pressley, 2000; Wray, Medwell, Fox, & Poulson, 2000), and this research primarily studies teachers in the early elementary grades (Graham, Harris, MacArthur, & Fink-Chorzempa, 2003). For these reasons,

there is a need to better understand writing practices at the upper elementary through middle school levels across the US. The purpose of this article is to identify, and then describe, large urban school district literacy leaders' views on the state of writing instruction within their districts. Instead of focusing on how writing is taught in a single classroom or a single school district, we wanted a broader understanding of how multiple districts throughout the US view middle school writing instruction for the 21st century.

Effective Writing Instruction for Young Adolescents

Research literature describes many of the qualities of good writing instruction as involving the scaffolding of the teaching of writing (Lacina & Silva, 2010; Fisher & Frey, 2003; Fisher & Frey, 2007), using literature as a model for writing (Lacina & Espinosa, 2010), using a process-based approach (Calkins, 1994; Graves, 1983), teaching writing within the content areas (Fisher & Frey, 2008; Lacina, Mayo, & Sowa, 2008; Lapp, Flood, & Farnan, 2008) and teaching reading and writing using the new literacies (Block & Lacina, 2008; Leu, O'Byrne, Zawilinski, McVerry, & Everett-Cacopardo, 2009; Moss & Lapp, 2010). In 2006, the Carnegie Corporation of New York commissioned two leading experts to study effective writing instructional strategies supported by strong scientific research; Graham and Perin (2007a) were appointed to do this work and presented their findings through the publication of *Writing Next: Effective Strategies to Improve Writing of Adolescents in Middle and High Schools* (Graham & Perin, 2007b). The study identified 11

research-based classroom practices to improve adolescent writing:

- **Writing Strategies:** Teaching students strategies for planning, revising, and editing their compositions
- **Summarization:** Explicitly and systematically teaching students how to summarize texts
- **Collaborative Writing:** Using instructional arrangements in which young adolescents work together to plan, draft, revise, and edit their compositions.
- **Specific Product Goals:** Assigning specific, reachable goals for the writing that students are to complete
- **Word Processing:** Using computers and word processors as instructional supports for writing assignments
- **Sentence Combining:** Teaching students to construct more complex, sophisticated sentences
- **Prewriting:** Engaging students in activities designed to help them generate or organize ideas for their composition
- **Inquiry Activities:** Engaging students in analyzing immediate, concrete data to help them develop ideas and content for a particular writing task
- **Process Writing Approach:** Interweaving a number of writing instructional activities in a workshop environment that stresses extended writing opportunities, writing for authentic audiences, personalized instruction, and cycles of writing
- **Study of Models:** Providing students with opportunities to read, analyze, and emulate models of good writing
- **Writing for Content Learning:** Using writing as a tool for learning content material. (Graham & Perin, 2007b, p. 3)

While we have a strong research base that describes the characteristics of highly effective

writing instruction for young adolescents, little research has examined if today's classrooms contain these elements.

Method

We purposefully selected the 17 most populous school districts throughout the US, using the US census data as a guide (2009). Then, we invited district literacy coordinators/directors to complete an online survey, implemented through Survey Monkey. We designed our survey questions using the 11 research-supported strategies for increasing students' writing proficiency (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2007).

Our research questions and the research literature review guided our study, which included four open-ended survey questions and two rating scales. The first rating scale requested that the participants identify any of the 11 writing strategies that exist within 50% of their district middle school classrooms; the second rating scale asked if middle school students are writing more proficiently than students of prior generations. Our research questions included:

- Are middle school students of this generation writing more proficiently, according to district administrators?
- How are large school districts across the country using researched-based instructional strategies to prepare 21st century writers?
- How do large school districts project changes in the teaching of writing within the next decade?

Data were analyzed after typing and coding the survey responses. We looked through the data searching for themes. Throughout our research, we described specific teaching practices that we noted in our analysis. Of the 17 school districts

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contacted, 13 district administrators completed the online survey (anonymously, as requested). In this article, we address the results from our first two questions.

Results

Are middle school students of this generation writing more proficiently, according to district administrators?

In the survey, we included a simple yes/no rating scale in which we posed this question: Are middle school students in your school district writing more proficiently than prior generations? Of the 13 district administrators who responded to the survey, 72.7% indicated that middle school students are *not* writing more proficiently than prior generations. The results from other items on the survey helped us better understand why the administrators held this view of students' writing proficiency. Respondents commented that little time invested in the teaching of writing is one of

the reasons why students are not better writers. Respondents also noted that teachers often focus more on form than content, resulting in students' low writing proficiency.

Participants were also asked to identify which of the 11 writing classroom practices to improve adolescent writing were present in 50% of the classrooms in their school district. Though one respondent failed to answer this question, 100% of the remaining 12 school districts reported that the prewriting strategy (Graham & Perin, 2007b) is used in 50% or more of the classrooms. Seventy-five percent reported that the majority of their districts' classrooms are teaching sentence combining and process writing. No other strategy was in use in 3 out of 4 school districts (see Table 1). As reported by the school district leaders, large middle schools in the US do not routinely use writing strategies, collaborative writing, statements of specific goals for writing, word processing, inquiry activities, the study and analysis of good writing models, and writing for

Table 1. Research-based classroom practices in writing within large school districts

Research-Based Writing Practices (see definitions, p. 11)	Present in 50% of classrooms	Present in <i>less</i> than 50% of classrooms
Writing Strategies	66.7% (8)	33.3% (4)
Collaborative Writing	41.7% (5)	58.3% (7)
Specific Product Goals (specific goals for writing)	58.3% (7)	41.7% (5)
Word Processing	58.3% (7)	41.7% (5)
Sentence Combining	75.0% (9)	25.0% (3)
Prewriting	100.0% (12)	0.0% (0)
Inquiry Activities	33.3% (4)	66.7% (8)
Process Writing Approach	75.0% (9)	25.0% (3)
Study of Models (reading and analyz- ing models of good writing)	33.3% (4)	66.7% (8)
Writing for Content Learning	66.7% (8)	33.3% (4)

content learning in the majority of the classrooms (including summarization). Table 1 summarizes the survey results for the various classroom practices for teaching writing.

How are large school districts across the country using researched-based instructional strategies to prepare 21st century writers?

When asked to identify the single most important action large school districts have taken to prepare middle school students to become 21st century writers, survey respondents reported several actions. Fifty percent of the survey respondents cited the introduction of technology as the single most important action taken by their school districts over the past decade. The following technology-related actions were noted by school district leaders:

- increasing availability for student writing instruction
- providing more professional development for teachers to help them use technology
- using the computer when writing first drafts and published projects
- integrating the use of technology across the content areas
- publishing student writing electronically

District leaders recognized that technology can change how teachers teach writing, and they documented the many ways technology was increasingly implemented in their schools (beyond using computers as word processors) throughout the various stages of the writing process.

When asked to project the changes their district will make in the next decade, 50% of the participants cited strategies for integrating writing across the content areas, but the methods used to make this change varied, including inquiry activities, writer's notebooks, and writing using technology across the curriculum. As one district leader explained:

Looking forward, it is critically important that aspects implemented within the elementary

program are expanded in an intensified manner to the secondary level. For example, increase the use of mentor texts as models for effective writing and intensify the use of writing for content learning. Expand teacher conversations of student writing to student conversations centered on their own writing as they engage in on-line feedback/revision groups.

Other district leaders reinforced a separation between the self and the world in their perspective on writing instruction, which is often typical of mainstream writing instruction in schools (Yagelski, 2009). An example of a non-progressive view of teaching writing is illustrated in this district's projection for the future:

The pendulum is swinging back to an increased emphasis on grammar and structure. The new STARR EOC exams will value a greater command of formal, proper English. Our curriculum will shift its focus to address this challenge.

As Yagelski (2009) explains, schools obsess with form and correctness, especially within the constructs of standardized writing assessments. In peer response activities, teachers also sometimes emphasize the production of a better text as conforming to writing conventions and academic writing. As a result, the writer's voice and ideas are separated from the piece of writing; the writing becomes only a piece of paper to be evaluated, instead of a way for a writer to communicate.

Many of the school district leaders maintained a non-progressive view about the teaching of writing within schools. For example, several participants noted that writing is still not a priority in their school districts. One respondent explained that in his/her large school district, upper level administrative literacy personnel changed frequently, and those curriculum leaders who are now responsible for writing instruction will be gone within one month as another group takes

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their place. As the respondent says, “The folks making the decisions about curriculum will be gone and another group will start from page one and attempt to make curriculum changes.” Another district leader notes the disheartening state of local writing instruction:

I am saddened to say that writing does not seem to be a priority in the district I work in, or most colleges. I would hope the Internet would be used for research, and wikis would be common places for creating research reports—but schools are so far behind in technology—actual equipment and general knowledge.

It is time for change. Now is the time for progressive educational leaders to use innovative instructional strategies to influence teachers’ practices and, most important, to make a profound impact on student learning. We offer the following recommendations to teachers and district leaders as a way to expand the teaching of writing and to increase student writing proficiency in the middle grades. These recommendations are based on Graham and Perin’s (2007b) research on effective writing strategies, as well as the advice from

the school leaders who responded to the survey.

Use authors and their texts as mentors. Technology is a wonderful way to study mentor texts (Sweeney, 2010) and the strategies authors use within their writing. A number of well-known authors of books for young readers have websites, webcasts, and blogs that document their lives as writers and the skills and strategies they use while writing. Such websites include authors Judy Blume (<http://www.judyblume.com/>), Jane Yolen (<http://janeyolen.com/>), Lois Lowry (<http://www.loislowry.com/>), R. L. Stine (<http://rlstine.com/>), and Linda Sue Park (<http://www.lindasuepark.com/>). In addition, the website teenreads.com (<http://teenreads.com/>) provides interviews with authors such as Chris Crutcher, Nicholas Sparks, and Meg Cabot. AdLit.org (<http://www.adlit.org/>) also provides an online video library of interviews with popular young adult fiction authors, like Christopher Paul Curtis, Deborah Hopkinson, Rodman Philbrick, Kate DiCamillo, and many others. Students today are much more visual learners than students in the past, and seeing and hearing an author talk about the writing process and strategies for writing bring the author’s work to life for our students.

Consider implementing peer response groups using wikis or blogs. Reading and responding to literature with young adolescents from different schools or countries using wikis can engage and motivate writers (Maltese & Naughter, 2010; Schillinger, 2011), while also providing them an opportunity to connect writing to content area learning. Young adolescents can respond to questions, post about a common reading, upload videos in which they are reading their writing, and discuss questions related to content area reading. There are a variety of free and easy to use wikis available, such as WikiSpaces (<http://www.wikispaces.com/>) and WikiTeacher (<http://wiki-teacher.com/>). Blogs are also places where students can post their drafts and become mentors to their classmates by sharing ideas for style and development of voice (Sweeney, 2010; Witte, 2007). There are many

CONNECTIONS FROM READWRITETHINK

Strategies for Writing Instruction

The authors highlight numerous strategies that can complement existing writing instruction. One is to “consider implementing peer response groups using wikis or blogs.” The ReadWriteThink.org lesson plan **Exploring the Prologue to *The Canterbury Tales*** using Wikis does just that. This follow-up assignment to the reading of Chaucer’s *General Prologue* to the *Canterbury Tales* gives students the opportunity to work in a collaborative setting with a technology that they may be familiar with, but may not know how to use to its best advantage. It shows students how to explicate text and research historical background while creating group wikis. Developing these wikis allows students to become experts and share information while learning to work as part of a team.

<http://www.readwritethink.org/classroom-resources/lesson-plans/exploring-prologue-canterbury-tales-30508.html>

teacher and student informational websites that guide teachers through the process of creating a blog, including: <http://escrapbooking.com/blogging/class.htm>, <http://www.coveritlive.com/>, and <http://www.edublogs.org>. Such technology is not new to our students; in fact, it is probably part of their lives outside of school. Incorporating today's technologies into classroom writing instruction can engage students and motivate them to participate more fully in the writing process.

Use real-time text tools to promote collaborative writing. Having students tweet or text their classmates (or a small writing group) about their writing ideas is an authentic and engaging way to bring technology into students' peer response groups (Warschauer, Arada, & Zheng, 2010). Students can use TitanPad (<http://titanpad.com/>), Make Literature Online (<http://makeliterature.com/>), or <https://docs.google.com/> to write collaboratively in real time with their peers. Young adolescents also develop a greater sense of community through online mediums (Young, 2008).

Include content area writing strategies throughout the curriculum. We highlight three research-based strategies for increasing writing proficiency throughout the content areas. First, the guided writing procedure (GWP) is an effective strategy for discussing, reading, and writing about content area concepts. Students begin this procedure by brainstorming ideas about a content area concept. Then, groups of students organize the ideas that were brainstormed into categories. Next, students write individually about the topic and then read a text to refine their writing (Knipper & Duggan, 2006).

Learning logs are another successful way for students to write across content areas. One of the most common ways learning logs are used is to supply a prompt that will engage students and help them to connect the content area topic to their background (Brozo & Simpson, 2003). Figure 1 is a sample science learning log, using Earle's (2000) trade book for sea creatures.

Structured note-taking, described in detail by Fisher & Frey (2004), is a third key writing strategy for content area learning. To begin, students

draw a vertical line to the left of center on their paper. In the first column, they record main ideas and important words; in the right-hand column, they record specific details to remember. The benefit of this strategy is that students record important information as they become more active readers and writers in the content learning process.

The recommendations we describe not only address the Alliance for Excellent Education (2007) recommendations for researched-based writing instruction, but they also integrate the new literacies of today. Connecting to students' backgrounds and experi-

Connecting to students' backgrounds and experiences, as well as engaging and motivating them through their technologies, bring writing to life and reinvigorate the classroom.

Predictions What will I learn from this material?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • I will learn about animals that live in the sea • I will learn about habitats in the sea
Concepts What have I learned from reading this material?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 97% of Earth's water is ocean • most ocean life is smaller than my thumb • porifera-sponges • cnidaria-stingers • annelids/nematodes-worms • mollusks-soft bodies and pretty shells • arthropods-like crabs • echinoderms-spiny skinned • chordates
Questions What don't I yet understand about this material?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Do these critters evolve? • What do they eat? • Can I eat all of these things?
Personal opinion What do I think about this material?	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Really awesome! • I like the pictures and the chart in the back of the book • If I were living in the sea I would be a shark

Figure 1. Learning log for sea creatures

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In Closing

What we learned from this survey research is that many school district leaders, along with professionals who prepare school district leaders, need to be reinvigorated with the excitement and possibilities for writing in the 21st century.

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An increase in students' writing proficiency will only occur when educational policymakers and national education leaders make writing a priority across all content areas, just as early reading instruction became a national initiative over the past decade. We must move beyond the doom and gloom messages of what middle level students cannot do to more innovative, research-based strategies for teaching writing, such as those discussed in our article.

Our country is electronically wired, and most students and teachers have access to technology. Indeed, many of the leaders who completed our survey understood the possibilities for this technology—and the hope for change over the next decade. Writing educators must find ways to teach writing every day for longer time periods, and they must focus on the writer and the writer's words and ideas instead of only teaching and assessing form and correctness. Empowering our students as writers transforms writing instruction and reinvigorates the educational community as a whole—and in the end, the students themselves are transformed into better writers.

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